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ABSTRACT

Noting that communication apprehension contributes to failed communication, which in turn places business organizations at risk, this paper describes the rationale and methodology of a study to determine whether managers can predict an employee's sense of responsibility and willingness to improve following an incident of failure, based on the employee's level of communication apprehension or level of self-esteem. The first half of the paper discusses the interrelationship of communication apprehension and failure, hypothesizing that if managers know an employee's level of communication apprehension, self-esteem may be predicted, thereby enabling them to predict the employee's resilience after failure and reducing the organizational risk. The second half of the paper describes the methodology and results of a study to determine whether the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension and the Janis-Field Self-Esteem Scale are inversely correlated and can be used by managers as cross-predictive tools. The paper concludes that (1) the significant inverse correlation between the two instruments indicates that they can be used to cross-predict either self-esteem level or communication apprehension, and (2) high self-esteem/low communication apprehension employees appear to be higher risk-takers who characterize their failures as positive, who take responsibility for their actions, and who to intensify their efforts to succeed after failure, thereby placing their organizations at a lower degree of risk than those with low self-esteem and high communication apprehension. (HTH)

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Communication Failure, Esteem Level, and Responsibility: A Willingness to Try Again

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Abstract

Employees who are highly communication apprehensive and sense low self-esteem place organizations at risk. Managers do not search for these employees in their work force. Consequently, managers also place their organizations at risk. The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-Organization (PRCA-O) and the Janis-Field Self-Esteem Scale (Revised) are two instruments that can be used by managers to assess employees' levels of communication apprehension and self-esteem. The two instruments are inversely correlated. They can be used as cross-predictive tools. Managers who know the level of either condition can reasonably predict the remaining level and reduce risk to their organizations. Levels of communication apprehension and self-esteem indicate, in part, the amount of increased effort an employee will exhibit after a failure in order to succeed at a future task.

Communication Failure, Esteem Level, and Responsibility: A Willingness to Try Again

This paper is about a job that managers are not doing well. Consequently, their organizations are at risk. Managers are not searching for employees in their own organizations who fear communicating with others. Employees who fear communicating will fail when they try to communicate. Communication failure results in distrust between workers, disrupted work schedules, misunderstood requirements, and strained relationships among peers, subordinates, and superiors; in short, lost business opportunity and lost profit.

McCroskey and Richmond (1977) defined communication apprehension (CA) as the "level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." McCroskey (1970) had written earlier that "a person with 'high' CA is one whose anxiety about or fear of communicating with others outweighs the person's projections of gain from such an activity."

The person who is highly communication apprehensive avoids communicating with others if possible. The thought of communicating with another person is as alarming as the act of communicating. Communication

apprehensive workers expect to fail when they communicate. They do fail. Their failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Managers should be concerned about helping their employees overcome fear of communicating with others. Why? Doing something about raising communication effectiveness makes good business sense. Pragmatically, managers should know about their communication fearful employees because these workers can have an effect on healthy upward, downward, and horizontal communication patterns and behaviors.

Managers communicate downward to pass action requirements or tasks to workers and to broadcast policy. Information is in danger of becoming misinterpreted when it passes through a communication apprehensive employee because of the fear that person has about communicating. When subordinates respond verbally to superiors these subordinates are passing information back up the chain of command as answers to tasks. If these reports pass through a communication apprehensive employee they can be distorted or altered unintentionally. Managers who get distorted information make less than optimal decisions. When communication

apprehensive employees cannot avoid communicating with their peers, messages may become leveled or condensed. Condensed messages are not uncommon in the business setting. One normal characteristic of communication is the very human trait that we all have to shorten and summarize messages. However, when a communication apprehensive employee condenses a message, he or she may be using this tactic to communicate as little as possible, and the end results may be a message that is devoid of important detail.

From the receiver's viewpoint, a condensed message must be assimilated. Assimilating a message involves restoring enough detail so as to make logical sense of it. The restored details may well be incorrect, and, as is well known employees, generally, refuse to seek amplifying details from a superior even though the subordinate does not fully understand the message. Assimilated messages, frequently, bear little likeness to the original message. As the assimilated message is transmitted downward, upward, or horizontally in the organization, employees, including key personnel, may well take the wrong action or do the wrong thing. The end result is that the organization is at unnecessary

and possibly very costly risk. This risk could have been avoided if people had communicated effectively with each other.

Communication apprehension contributes to failed communication. Failed communication places the organization at risk. Stoner (1982) focuses our attention on the importance of communication when he informs that the communication process is the very foundation upon which management functions depend, and, as Mintzberg (1975) discovered, managers spend from 66 to 80 percent of their time in oral communication. Time is an unrecoverable resource. Time wasted in ineffective communication with communication fearful employees contributes nothing to the well being of the organization. What, then, is the effect of failed communication on the communication apprehensive employee? More importantly, will a communication apprehensive employee increase his or her effort to succeed in a future task after a failure?

Psychologists have studied the impact of failure on future performance. Their research conclusions help us to answer the questions we have posed above

because their collective research has been focused on intensification of personal effort to succeed after failure. These scholars have investigated the notions of self-esteem--a person's sense of self-worth (Brockner, et al, 1983), reactance behavior (Wortman & Brehm, 1975), learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), pre-treatment inoculation to failure (Roth & Kubal, 1975), and causal attribution for failure (Dyck, Vallentyne, & Breen, 1979). Broadly, their findings indicate that high self-esteem persons react positively to personal failure, intensify their efforts to succeed after a failure, cope effectively in regaining control in situations, can be pre-treated against failure, and tend to internalize failure by holding themselves accountable for the failure.

But, communication apprehension also represents failure and this type of failure has not been studied by psychologists. Rather, communication apprehension is a phenomenon that communication scholars have studied. Linking communication apprehension and self-esteem levels might provide a powerful tool for managers to use in assessing their employees' resilience to bounce back after failure and intensify efforts to

succeed at future tasks.

Both the communication apprehension assessment scales and the self-description inventory of self-esteem seek to identify individual proneness to failure. Low self-esteem persons do not hold a high sense of their personal self-worth; high communication apprehensive persons fear communicating with others. Neither condition breeds the kind of energized employee who maximizes his or her contribution to the wellness of the organization.

Since the communication apprehension and self-esteem scales both seek to identify failure they serve the same useful purpose. However, neither the psychological or speech communication literature shows any attempt to cross-correlate the two instruments. This oversight is interesting because if there is an inverse correlation between the two instruments, then they can be used successfully as cross-predictors of either condition.

Managers who know the communication apprehension level of the employees in their work force will have a reliable indication of the self-esteem levels of those employees as well as a clear idea of how resilient they

will be after failure. Managers can use this important information to reduce risk to their organizations by identifying those employees who (a) would be most likely to increase their efforts to succeed after failure, and (b) those employees who, most likely, would not.

At issue here are the possible inverse correlation of two separate--but like--instruments and the willingness of employees to increase personal effort to succeed after failure. These specific issues have not been examined in the organizational setting. This research will correct that gap, and, hopefully, contribute to the body of knowledge of how people work in organizations.

Research Design

In order to test these issue, a research design was created that applied to a business setting. The design focused on manager-subordinate relationships. A hypothetical failure was created that contained three levels of risk. Level one (the most negative condition)

placed an "employee" as responsible for a failure in the work place. In this condition, the employee was severely criticized by his or her immediate supervisor. Level two (a less severe negative condition) placed an employee in a failure situation, but the employee was not held personally responsible for the failure. Level three was the control condition in which no failure condition was mentioned.

Two independent variables (communication apprehension and self-esteem levels) were tested against two dependent variables (willingness after failure and sense of responsibility for the failure).

Three research questions were posed:

R_1: Does inverse correlation exist between the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (Organization) (PRCA-O) and the revised Janis-Field Self-Esteem Scale?

If, as predicted, an inverse correlation exists between these two instruments, then they can be used to cross-predict either communication apprehension or self-esteem level. In other words, if a manager knows

either the communication apprehension or self-esteem level of a member of his or her work force, that manager can make a fairly well informed assumption about the level of the unassessed quantity. These two pieces of information are not trivial. Managers can use these data to estimate the amount of future effort an employee will put forth in future performance after a failure.

Using the Dyck, Vallentyne, & Breen (1979) work as a point of departure, a second research question was developed. Of interest is a determination of the perception of personal answerableness for a previous failure. Managers who have some indication of how responsible their subordinates hold themselves to be for a previous failure will be able to gain some idea of the strength of character of their subordinates. In other words, managers might discover to what extent their subordinates are ready to stand up and be counted. This research question is posed as follows:

R_2: Do low communication apprehension, high self-esteem employees exhibit a greater sense of responsibility after failure than high communication apprehension, low self-esteem employees?

Finally, having some indication of communication apprehension and self-esteem levels, and understanding how responsible for failure their employees feel, managers need to have some clue about how willing their employees are to try again after failure. Here is the practical aspect of this research. The notion of willingness can be viewed as a person's "true grit" or self-motivation to succeed after failure. In the organizational setting, the practical applications of high levels of willingness to try again are almost boundless. The third research question is, therefore, framed as follows:

R_3: Do low communication apprehension, high self-esteem employees demonstrate a greater willingness to try to succeed in future tasks after failure than low self-esteem, high communication apprehension employees?

Method

Scenario

The scenario was set in a plausible business

setting. All subjects were asked to read the following situation:

> You are a supervisor in a manufacturing company. Your work record is good and you have been with the company for five years. The company encourages employees to suggest ideas that they believe will improve work place procedures. Recently, one of your employees submitted a suggestion to reduce inventory from ten days stockage to three. This reduction represented a considerable savings. Local suppliers of your inventory assured the employee that they could deliver parts within three days. You checked and found that your employee's information was substantially correct. You endorsed the suggestion up the line and management approved it. Your superior directed you to implement the new procedure in your section immediately.

Subjects in risk category two were provided the following additional details:

> Unfortunately, the new procedure did not produce the desired outcomes. At one time the entire assembly line was in jeopardy of being halted because your section was not able to provide sub-assemblies for which your section is responsible.

Subjects in risk category three (the most negative) were given the following further information:

> Your superior criticized you severely and made clear the fact that any repetition of this kind would result in your personal censure in the company.

Regardless of risk category, all subjects then read the closing paragraph as follows:

> This morning another employee of yours gave you a suggestion recommending a change in procedure. The employee was very enthusiastic about anticipated increases in efficiency of your section. The employee's suggestion seems to have merit.

Subjects

The research sample consisted of sixty-six undergraduate students at a large public university.

Subjects were enrolled in a business and professional communication course. The sample was composed of thirty-nine males and twenty-seven females. Subjects were eighteen to twenty-nine years old (mean = 20.56 years).

Procedure

The researcher informed the subjects that he was interested in manager-subordinate relationships in the organization. All subjects were given a packet that contained preliminary information, a PRCA-O scale, a self-esteem scale, a scenario, and four questions concerning the scenario. Two questions concerned the actual research issues and two were included as manipulation checks. Packets were randomly distributed and subjects were considered randomly assigned because they represented a much larger population of business or public administration students. Only gender and age were asked as demographic data.

Subjects completed the PRCA-O and self-esteem scales, read the scenario, and responded to the four questions. Responses were recorded using a standard seven-point semantic differential scale. Subjects were

asked to indicate their sense of responsibility for the initial failure and respond on a scale ranging from (1) "not responsible at all" to (7) "very responsible." They were then asked to indicate their willingness to recommend a new suggestion from a subordiante employee to their superior and record their answers on a scale ranging from (1) "not willing at all" to (7) "very willing." On the responsibility dimension, subjects were asked a manipulation check question that required them to indicate their sense of the outcome of the first suggestion from (1) "very negative" to (7) "very positive." A second question was asked regarding the dimension of risk involved in recommending the second suggestion. Responses ranged from (1) "not risky at all" to (7) "very risky."

R_1 was tested using correlation coefficient procedures. R_2 and R_3 testing involved establishing a series of 2 x 3 factorial designs and analysis of variance. Communication apprehension/self-esteem levels and risk categories (levels one, two, and three) were the independent variables. The subjects' degree of willingness and sense of responsibility served as the dependent variables.

Results

Subjects were classified high self-esteem (HSE) or low self-esteem (LSE) and high communication apprehensive (HCA) or low communication apprehensive (LCA) based on median splits of their scores on the two assessment instruments. Upper and lower limits of self-esteem were 85 and 46, respectively (median = 65.5). There were 34 LSE and 32 HSE subjects. Upper and lower limits of communication apprehension were 75 and 24, respectively (median = 50.5). There were 34 HCA and 32 LCA subjects. Table 1 depicts the location of all subjects within cells.

A significant inverse correlation between the PRCA-O and the Janis-Field Self-Esteem Scale (revised) was found, $r = -.7513$, $p < .05$.

H/LSE and H/LCA subjects all indicated a greater sense of responsibility for the previous failure than those subjects, regardless of esteem and apprehension levels, in the control group. Significance was noted across failure category levels only, $F(2, 60) = 4.76$, $p < .025$; $F(2, 60) = 4.39$, $p < .05$.

HSE subjects indicated the greatest willingness to accept a new suggestion even under conditions of the

most negative outcome (held personally responsible for the previous failure), $F(1, 60) = 4.67$, $p < .025$. LCA subjects indicated their strongest willingness to accept the new suggestion under the level two failure outcome (not held personally responsible for the previous failure), $F(1, 60) = 6.94$, $P < .005$. Significance was also noted across failure category levels for both SE and CA, $F(2, 60) = 3.37$, $p < .05$; $F(2, 60) = p < .05$.

The two manipulation check questions (sense of risk involved in accepting the new suggestion and characterization of the outcome of the first suggestion) resulted in significence in the failure category level only for SE, $F(2, 60) = 6.37$, $p < .005$; $F(2, 60) = 51.68$, $p < .000$, as well as CA, $F(2, 60) = 8.35$, $p < .005$; $F(2, 60) = 58.38$, $p < .000$.

Discussion

HSE subjects demonstrated the greatest willingness to increase their personal effort after a previous failure even under the most negative outcome in which they were held personally responsible for the first

failure. LCA subjects demonstrated a willingness to increase their efforts, but only when not held personally responsible for the previous failure. Both of these groups were; however, more willing to increase personal effort after failure than the control group subjects. HSE/LCA subjects all sensed some degree of personal responsibility for the previous failure. This is interpreted to mean that, in general, most employees sense some degree of answerableness for failed, as well as successful, projects when they are involved in the decision to implement the project. HSE subjects saw low risk involved in accepting the second suggestion (and, thereby, increasing their efforts to try again after failure); whereas, there was virtually no difference between H/LCA subjects in perception of risk although both groups perceived a higher degree of risk than subjects in the control group, the groups trended toward the lower (non-risky) position. HSE subjects perceived the characterization of the initial failure outcome as positive second only to the control group even under the most negative outcome. LCA subjects perceived a positive characterization of the initial outcome most strongly under the not held

responsible condition; however, both H/LSE and H/LCA subjects perceived the initial outcome as much more negative than the control group subjects.

Conclusion

The significant inverse correlation between the PRCA-O and the Janis-Field Self-Esteem Scale indicates that the two instruments can be used to cross-predict either of the two conditions of SE and CA. Managers who know an employee's level in one condition can predict the remaining level with some reasonable degree of accuracy. Therefore, support for R_1 has been demonstrated.

Support for R_2 and R_3 is less clear. Overall, HSE/LCA subjects (and organizational employees) seem to demonstrate that they are higher risk-takers who characterize their failures as positive, and take responsibility for their actions. They appear to intensify their efforts to succeed after failure. In doing so, they place their organizations at a lower degree of risk than employees who fear communicating with others and feel a low sense of self-worth.

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Table 1

Subjects x Level of SE and CA x Failure Category

Levels	Failure Category		
	Not held Responsible	Held Responsible	Control
HSE	11	12	11
LSE	11	13	10
LCA	9	13	10
HCA	13	9	10